CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Primary Campaign Oral History Project
Interview with Ethel Delaney Lee
Conducted on July 28, 2017 by Betty King

Ethel Delaney Lee came to Washington in 1952. She became a leader in her Ward 4 community and the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church and supported Mayor Walter Washington in the first home rule election in 1974. Then she met Marion Barry in 1978. That year she worked full time at the campaign headquarters and she supported Marion throughout the remainder of his political career.

BK: We will begin then. My name is Betty King. It's Friday, July 27th, I think, and I'm talking to Ethel Delaney Lee. Ethel, thank you.

EDL: It's the 28th.

BK: Twenty-eighth, okay. Ethel, thank you very much for coming to talk to us about 1978 and your relationship with Marion Barry. Are you a native Washingtonian or did you migrate here from someplace else?

EDL: I migrated. My father was a Methodist minister and I was born in New Jersey, but I lived in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York.

BK: And when did you come to the District?

EDL: I came to the District in 1952 upon the graduation of my husband from the Howard University College of Dentistry. He graduated and they hired him immediately to start teaching, and although I had stayed in New Jersey and worked in the post office the entire time he was in the College of Dentistry, he told me he was going to teach only one year at the College of Dentistry, so I said, "Well, I'm coming to DC for that one year."

BK: And how long did you – you never moved.

EDL: That was 1952.

BK: Did he only teach for one year?

EDL: He taught for six and a half years and then he opened his practice.

BK: Now, when did you first come into contact with Marion Barry?

EDL: My first personal contact was in 1978. I did not have any personal contact with Marion Barry prior to that. Joseph Carter, if you remember him –

BK: I do, I remember Joe.

EDL: – brought him to my church. That's Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, to which I have belonged since 1954. Joe brought Marion to my church.

BK: Now, what was Joe doing at that time? What was his position?

EDL: Well, he was, I guess, supporting Marion's desire to run for mayor, and I'm not sure what his exact position was. But at the time, Joseph Carter was a vice president at Garfinckel's Department Store.

BK: Was he indeed?

EDL: Yes.

BK: Okay. I remember him just as a political activist. So, he brought him to the church in 1978?

EDL: Yes, and after church, during our fellowship hour, he introduced me to Marion Barry and Marion wanted to know if I lived in DC. And I said, "Yes, and I see you all over town." Then, sometime subsequent to that, I had the occasion to drive to Richmond, Virginia, for an event, and upon my return there was a message from Marion Barry that he was speaking at an event in my neighborhood that Sunday afternoon and he wanted me to hear him speak, and he had indicated that part of the DC Youth Chorale [she meant DC Youth Orchestra] would be playing. So, I went to hear him speak and after, during the

social hour, he asked me if I'd be willing to give a few hours a week to his campaign. So, I agreed to do that.

BK: A few hours. (Laughter.)

EDL: A few hours. And it was so interesting that I started going down there every day.

BK: Was this the first political campaign that you'd worked on?

EDL: To that extent. I had worked very briefly on Mayor Walter Washington's campaign, but it was more like a poll worker.

BK: Was this in '74 or '78?

EDL: That was '74.

BK: So, you'd worked in the previous –

EDL: Yes.

BK: – mayoral election. Okay. Yeah, I mean, you know, Marion's going to say, "I just need you for a few hours," and he's going to take up as much of your time as he possibly can. (Laughter.)

EDL: Right. Well, on July 4th, I had attended a birthday party for Effi. It was at their residence and Anita Bonds was there, and I had already started working in the office with Anita, and on July 4th, I said, "Anita, let's go down to the office and get Marion's petitions ready." He was to file his petitions the next day, July 5th. So, we eventually went down there, and Anita and I were the only two on July 4th, and on July 5th, Marion Barry asked me to accompany him, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Lillian Sedgwick –

BK: Yeah, Lillian was co-chair of the campaign.

EDL: Okay. And there was an African American reporter from the *Post*. I do not –

BK: Milton Coleman?

EDL: No. It wasn't –

BK: No, no, it wasn't Milton, it was Leon Dash.

EDL: Leon Dash. Before I was accompanying Marion, we walked from his headquarters to the Board of Elections, and Walter Washington had the biggest shock on his face when I walked in there with Marion Barry. Walter Washington never learned my name.

BK: No!

EDL: But he knew my face.

BK: Walter was a classy guy, but not what we needed at that time.

EDL: Right.

BK: He was a nice fellow but not what we needed.

EDL: So, I started working down there every single day. In fact, the first time I rode the Metro subway was going from my home to Marion Barry's campaign office.

BK: That was when we were down on – what was it? In the old Miller Fur store on, was it F Street or G Street? What was it?

EDL: I think it was G. I know the exit to the subway came right – when I exited, I was really right at the office.

BK: That's right. It was very close. It was very close.

EDL: I thought they said it was old Woodward & Lothrop building, but –

BK: It was near the old Woodies building, but it was the Miller Fur store, and it was three stories above ground and the basement, where you were with Anita. So, it was four stories and just a small building. So, you worked throughout the – up until the primary?

EDL: Yes. In fact, that was July, and in August I had surgery. And I was recuperating for three weeks, and during that three-week period, I made over 500 phone calls for Marion

Barry, and the totals came out, the percentages came out almost exactly the way the primary did.

BK: Really?

EDL: It was a third for Sterling Tucker, a third for Walter Washington, and a third for Marion Barry. And the interesting part about that, my husband, even though he was not involved, was a Walter Washington person; my oldest daughter was actually working in Sterling Tucker's campaign; and I put Marion Barry's poster on the front lawn.

BK: (Laughter.) You didn't have the three posters lined up? Just Marion's?

EDL: No, just Marion Barry's. In fact, Jerry Vallery – I don't know if you remember Jerry Vallery – he lived two doors from me, and he came over me and he said, "Wow. That really is taking a stand." Because I was the only one who had nerve enough in my community to put a Marion Barry poster on my lawn.

BK: You were living in Verbena Street then too?

EDL: Since 1954. [She meant 1963]. Yes.

BK: That's great. I love that.

EDL: And while I was recuperating from surgery – what's his name? Sterling Tucker, Water Fauntroy, and Arrington Dixon had formed a coalition, and they did a motorcade that was coming down Verbena Street, and I looked out the window, and one of the cars from that motorcade stopped in front of my house. They were cracking up laughing because Marion Barry's poster was on the front lawn. And, of course, at that time, they felt he didn't have one iota of a chance.

BK: We were the only people who knew that we were going win, that were convinced we were going to win.

EDL: Right.

BK: Nobody else thought we had a chance of a snowball in hell.

EDL: That's right. That's right.

BK: That's wonderful. So, you continued to work at headquarters until the primary day, right?

EDL: Oh, absolutely.

BK: And did you come down to the Harambee House for the celebration?

EDL: Oh, I was in the front, the very front.

BK: And all the people who were there, saying, "We've been with you, Marion, we've been with you all –" We'd never seen them.

EDL: I know.

BK: I know. It was amazing.

EDL: Indeed.

BK: Yeah, that was an exciting night. It was an exciting night.

EDL: Oh, that period, I tell you, it was really one of the joys of my life.

BK: Yeah, mine too. Mine too.

EDL: Yes.

BK: And so, now we've won the primary and we're getting ready for the general election, which was pretty much a cakewalk but, did you continue to work at headquarters during the –

EDL: I certainly did. And then, on the Election Day, I don't remember who asked me, but I was asked by the Barry campaign to go to election headquarters to observe the vote count, because, you know, at that time – I mean the Board of Elections.

BK: Yeah. Oh, really? Okay, now tell me about that. Who else was there on behalf of the campaign?

EDL: I was the only one.

BK: Were you?

EDL: Yes.

BK: You hadn't been there on primary night, just on the general election?

EDL: General election.

BK: You were Marion's official poll watcher on election night?

EDL: Wait a minute. No, it was it was during the primary.

BK: In the primary?

EDL: Yes, where I was sent to observe the –

BK: The count.

EDL: Yes. And in the morning, Marion was losing but then eventually he started taking over, and as I said before, I wanted to come out and just broadcast the fact that Marion was leading. But of course, you know, we were locked in and –

BK: Of course.

EDL: – I was not released until eight o'clock.

BK: Yeah. No, our numbers came up when people started voting on their way home from work.

EDL: Okay. And one of my neighbors, who's now deceased, that I had called when I was making the 500 phone calls, he told me that he was going to support Marion, but he did not want his wife or any of the neighbors to know.

BK: I know. In certain wards and precincts, there was a lot of that going around because people didn't want to – nobody thought we could win.

EDL: I know.

BK: And yet, people were turned on by Marion's message and his personality and the progressive program that he was proposing. And so, a lot of people, who wouldn't admit to having – some of those people who came down to the Harambee House and said, "I've been with you all along," may have –

EDL: Right.

BK: – they may actually have been, silently, closeted, been with us all along, but a lot of them were not. A lot of them were not.

EDL: I know.

BK: So, you were – but that's very interesting because – I've got to check what Anita said, because she said that she got news from somebody else but perhaps he was – I'll have to check what she said. Perhaps he was there representing another campaign and called her or something. It was before we all had cell phones in our pockets and could make phone calls.

EDL: And she said someone –

BK: Someone else had called her to say that we had won, on primary night.

EDL: Oh. It was not I.

BK: You know, and I thought that Phil Ogilvie [campaign worker from Ward 6] had been there, because he was very much involved in counting, but –

EDL: Well, you know, Betty, my memory is not what it used to be. Now, I do not recall Phil Ogilvie's being there, but maybe he was.

BK: Well, and he may have been there at the general election and not at the primary.

EDL: Uh-huh.

BK: So, after we win, were you appointed to a board or commission or did you serve in the first administration in any way?

EDL: No. But Joseph Carter – I forgot – at the time was alternate national committeeman at the DC Democratic State Committee, and then he was promoted to national committeeman. So, Marion Barry wanted me to run for the Ward 4 position that Joseph Carter had. And I won. I beat out Janette Hoston Harris and she has never forgiven me for it.

BK: No, she wouldn't, and I'm sure she wouldn't.

EDL: And let me tell you this. She had some kind of leadership position for DC and the Jimmy Carter presidential campaign, and in that position, she scheduled Jesse Jackson to come and speak at my church. I had worked diligently for Jimmy Carter, and I had even worked in the rain and whatnot for Jimmy Carter. So, Gwen Hemphill [labor activist], who at the time had a position in the White House, gave me VIP tickets for the event at my church. And so, when I entered the church that evening – I don't know if you ever been to my church, Metropolitan AME.

BK: I'm quite sure I have.

EDL: There are two main aisles and there's a main center section.

BK: Right.

EDL: And I came down the aisle on the right. When Janette Hoston Harris spotted me, she came running down the other aisle and said, "You can't sit there. You can't sit there." And so, she came running over. This was after I had whipped her in the election, and I showed her my VIP ticket. She said, "I don't care. I don't care. You can't sit there."

BK: Oh, no.

EDL: And so, you know, the people in my church, the members of my church, they were looking, and I thought she was really going to hit me. So rather than to have all that commotion in the sanctuary – and I hate myself today – I just got up and moved, but there were so few people who came to that event, they eventually asked everybody to move to the front. But I stayed in the back.

BK: (Laughter.) That's amazing. I mean, that is just the absolute thing that you don't do in politics. An enemy in the past has got to be wooed, and that was something that Marion taught us. He used to drive us crazy, I don't know about you, because he was always wooing people who had opposed him in the past. But that's what you do in politics, you never give up on trying to convince somebody to support you. Too bad.

EDL: Oh, something else I forgot to tell you. I invited people in my community to come to my house to meet Marion Barry, and I know I sent out at least a hundred invitations.

BK: Of course.

EDL: And I think I had less than twenty people, and one of those persons was Dr. Curry. You remember Doctor Curry?

BK: No, I'm not sure I do.

EDL: Well, Marion ended up appointing him to head up the DC Heart Association or something after that.

BK: Wonderful.

EDL: But he met Marion Barry at my house. And so, a couple of weeks later, I had so much champagne and whatnot left, I decided just to have a cocktail party, and I invited, oh, lots and lots of people. There were wall-to-wall people in my house. They were all over the

house. And Hank Larsen was angry because Marion didn't show. Effi finally found him somewhere in Southeast playing poker. (Laughter.) So, by the time he got to my house, most of the people had left. But Mattie Taylor was still there, so he got a get-acquainted event from her that night, and three of my neighbors: Cilla Adkins – remember Cilla Adkins?

BK: I remember the name.

EDL: She and her husband owned the O Street Market and different businesses.

BK: Oh, yes, of course.

EDL: Yeah, Cilla Adkins, Midge and Jerry Vallery, and there's another lady who I can't think of the name, they formed a committee and had a fundraiser. I never had fundraisers, I just always had –

BK: Meet-and-greets.

EDL: Right.

BK: But you usually pitched for money though, I'm sure.

EDL: Not really.

BK: Not really?

EDL: In fact, when I had him at my house the second time – no, this was later – one of my neighbors, Lucille and Bob Gayle, gave a contribution, and I gave it to a fellow who's an accountant. He ended up moving to Philadelphia and they never found that check.

BK: No? What a shame. (Laughter.)

EDL: Right. But that was in later years, maybe for the second campaign, because I had Marion at my house several times.

BK: Now, did we never appoint you to a board or commission?

EDL: Oh, yes.

BK: What did you serve on?

EDL: I was with the DC Community Humanities Council.

BK: Oh, after I retired, I was on the Humanities Council too. Great fun. Giving away money.

EDL: You are the one who, I think, represent – I don't know. You gave me a certificate for something.

BK: Oh, no, no, that – I mean you were on the Humanities. I was special –

EDL: You headed up –

BK: I was Special Assistant to the Mayor for Boards and Commissions.

EDL: Right.

BK: That's why I asked you, because all of the – you know, we used all of our good people, of which you were way at the top of the list, on Boards and Commissions.

EDL: Remember Lucille Knowles [on staff in the 1978 campaign]?

BK: Of course.

EDL: She joined my church a couple months ago.

BK: Great. I'm so glad. Her mother died recently. It was very sad.

EDL: She told me. But I have not seen Lucille for a few years.

BK: Well, she and I keep in touch because we worked together for so many years. She was my assistant for many years in the Office of Boards and Commissions. Well, no, so tell me, what do you think the impact was of Marion Barry's being mayor on the face of the District of Columbia?

EDL: Oh, he has left an indelible imprint. You know, he was not my cup of tea early, and then when I met – I'll tell you, the night that I decided I was going to support Marion – in fact, Jeanette Michael [Ward 1 activist]. Remember Jeanette Michael?

BK: I do indeed, very well.

EDL: Jeanette and I sat next to each other when Marion Barry debated Sterling Tucker about public school education. Sterling Tucker knew nothing, and that was the night that Jeanette Michael and I decided we were going to support him, but I never ever dreamed of actually working in his campaign. But to see the interest that he had in people, all walks of life, as humans, the – what did he call them? The least and the –

BK: The least, the lost and the left out.

EDL: Oh, my goodness. It had such a deep philosophical meaning for me.

BK: Yeah. Me too.

EDL: I just, I will never forget him. There's no way. And I don't know how to explain it, Betty. I really don't.

BK: Yeah.

EDL: In fact, for the first time, I told Cora [Barry, Marion's third wife] yesterday on the phone how I became involved in his campaign, was after having met him at my church, and then how he asked me that Sunday afternoon to donate a few hours a week, so – and then, the other thing, even – not only the impact that he had on the city, it was the great friends –

BK: I know.

EDL: – that I met. And one of the things that I'll never forget was that you hosted, the night before his memorial service, it was just wonderful seeing everyone. And that – I want to

call him young man, he's young compared to me – that I thought had passed away. Sybil Hammond told me he had passed away, and there he was.

BK: Now, who was that?

EDL: He used to own the Hawk 'n' Dove.

BK: Oh, Stu Long.

EDL: Stu Long.

BK: He's not been well.

EDL: Oh, really?

BK: No, not been well. But no, Stu, yeah. Oh, listen, you must get one of your children or grandchildren to bring their computer over, and you've got to listen to some of these things. I'll give you the link and get one of your children to bring their computer over, or their tablet or whatever, so that you can listen to some of these oral histories. Stu Long's oral history is hilarious. It is wonderful.

EDL: Oh, really?

BK: You'll fall off your chair laughing, it's so wonderful. But they're all very interesting. And for almost everybody, a key thing was the friendships that were forged out of the summer of 1978. I mean, we're still in touch with each other, and, you know, we have such a special memory –

EDL: Right.

BK: – that we share, so –

EDL: I remember Stu Long, I think he financed one of the trips on the old presidential yacht.

BK: Was it the presidential yacht or was it the – was it the presidential yacht?

EDL: Yeah. I can't think of the name of it right now. If you were to call the name – in fact, there's a restaurant down in Southwest, I guess it still has the name. And I said I never ever dreamed that I would ever put my foot on that yacht.

BK: (Laughter.) Yeah, I know. Stu was involved in saving it at one point, and I can't remember the name of it either. Yeah. No, many, many happy memories. Many, many happy memories.

EDL: Oh, I'm telling you. And Effi [Marion's second wife], she was such a wonderful –

BK: She was a beautiful lady.

EDL: Oh, my goodness.

BK: Yeah.

EDL: Yes, and she always admired my family, you know, when I had him at my house several times. In fact, one occasion was when my daughter Cheryl got married for the first time, he – I have pictures where Marion, Effi and little Christopher [their son] came straight from the Bahamas to the wedding reception that was in my backyard.

BK: Oh, that's wonderful.

EDL: And little Christopher was talking with one of my sisters. She was a sister by my mother's first marriage, that she just passed away about three or four years ago, 105.

BK: Oh, my goodness.

EDL: But little Christopher just – it was like a magnet the way he was attracted to that sister, and he told my sister, he said, "My dad's car has big guns in it."

BK: (Laughter.) That's great.

EDL: Oh, yes.

BK: Well he did, he enriched our lives and of course the lives of everybody in the District of Columbia when he was mayor. He had his demons and so forth, but his contribution to this community was extraordinary.

EDL: Oh, and every time I see that Chinese Arch [at 7th and H streets], you know, they say he forged the relationship between Beijing and DC.

BK: Right, exactly.

EDL: Yes. And I bought a clock at the Armory [she meant at the Convsention Center] when Beijing did a display down here.

BK: Great.

EDL: Yes.

BK: Well, thank you very much for telling us about your experiences in '78 and beyond. And from a personal point of view, it was lovely to have a chance to talk with you again. It's been marvelous.

EDL: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Betty.

BK: My pleasure.

[End of interview]